

PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS AMONG JUKUN (WAPAN) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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ABSTRACT

People learning a new language like English cannot use it effectively as a medium of communication; spoken or written unless they know and correctly use its components one of which is pronunciation. Poor communication distorts meaning. This paper therefore is primarily an investigation on pronunciation problems among Jukun (Wapan) speakers of English. It provides information on why these problems possibly occur and the specific English phonemes that Wapan speakers of English find difficult to pronounce or articulate. Only segmental phonology is considered and the model for the study is Received Pronunciation (RP). The study revealed that, pronunciation problems among the people are due to some extent at least, to mother-tongue influence. In spite of this, however, we cannot generalize because even among the people, ranging from the very highly educated to those with limited education we find a very great range of usage.

Keywords: Jukun, Received Pronunciation, segmental phonology, Mother-tongue influence, conflation and epenthesis.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a vital aspect of language learning as poor pronunciation distorts or mars the communication process. Every speakers of a language requires good pronunciation skills. In other words, good speaking requires good pronunciation especially when one is communicating with people outside one's immediate linguistic environment or speech community. In fact, every speaker of a language is expected to produce correct forms of sound in the language to ensure effective communication.

Pronunciation is one of the several problems affecting most people learning English as a second Language (L2). Pronunciation problems result when learning or speaking a second language because most people are used to hearing and making sounds which only exist in their mother-tongue (MT) or (L1). In a paper titled; Fulbe Difficulties in learning the Hausa Sound System, Abubakar argues as follows:

No matter the number of one's language phonemic inventory, when one tries to learn a foreign language one is bound to have some difficulties in areas of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of these four areas of difficulty, the most prominent and shibbolethics one is phonology. One's first language interferes considerably in the learning of a foreign language.

There is no universally intelligible pronunciation of English which all can use as there are varieties of the language. According to Roach (1983:3) the pronunciation of English in North America is different from most accents found in Britain. There are exceptions to this you can find accents in parts of Britain that sound American and accents in North America that sound English but the pronunciation that you are likely to hear from most Americans does sound noticeably different from BBC pronunciation.

Roach (ibid) asserts that there are several accents of English in England, but the range becomes very much wider if the accents of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scotland and Wales are included in Britain, and together with North Ireland Form the United Kingdom) are taken into account (Ibid). According to Gimson (2001:297), faced with great diversity of English accents, the foreigner learner might wish that there existed a neutral all-purpose international pronunciation of English. Gimson further stresses that changes in language on the basis of accent, dialect and variety are a reality.

It is obvious that the pronunciation of many learners of English across the globe does not reflect the pronunciation norms of the RP or Standard English even though these learners are aware of the phonemic distinctions of RP. Writing on English pronunciation among Nigerians, Jowitt (1991:69) in Banjo (1971) says; ‘...all the phonemic distinctions of RP are perceptively real for the educated Nigerian user, but he produces what in many cases are distinctively Nigerian phonemic features’. Writing on the concept of Nigerianism in the English language, Ogunsiji in Adeyanju (2007) observes that when a Nigerian speaks English, no matter his level of education, native speakers of English have no difficulty of identifying the speaker as a Nigerian because of the reflection of some structural characteristics of Nigerian languages. The structure may be phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic or semiotic.

For the purpose of this paper, data was collected from educated Wapan speakers of English and used to show the pronunciation problems among them.

Area of study

The area of study is Wukari Local Government in Taraba State, Nigeria. And the language or people studied are the Jukun (Wapan) speakers of English. Jukun language comprises several dialects some of which are Wanu, Nyifon, Kuteb, Jibu, Kona, and Wapan which is the focus of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through participant observation of utterances of one hundred native speakers who are considered as educated with relative degree of communicative competence in English. These native speakers, who were randomly selected, were also asked to read a list of English words in order to determine their levels of proficiencies in pronunciation. Errors of pronunciation particularly those associated with conflation, epenthesis, word reduction and spelling pronunciation, among others were considered. Data collected were analysed bearing in mind the Received Pronunciation (RP) model.

Spelling Pronunciation

Among most non-native speakers of English we have a number of mispronunciations due to what is referred to as spelling pronunciation. Learners of English tend to pronounce most phonemes and words without much reference to RP: the sort of English used by educated native speakers in South-east England; they naturally attach pronunciation to a letter or sequence of letters. They assume a one to one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation which is inappropriate. Yule (1996:58) states: ‘Note that ‘throw’ begin with only two consonants |θ r|, once again showing that spelling is not a good guide in phonology.

Similarly, Jowitt (1991:68) observes, ‘deprived of consistently reliable guidance from teachers, pupils unconsciously relied on MT models as indeed many of their teachers did; and assuming that there was a perfect correspondence between sound and spelling, they used orthography as their guide to pronunciation. Unofficial inter-language norms therefore determined usage.

Writing on English pronunciation, Eyisi (2007:9) says, “orthography is no longer a direct reflection of how words should be pronounced; phonetics does the magic”. She argues further that, one’s ability to analyse a word into its individual sounds does not depend on the knowledge of how the word is spelt. For instance, both ‘not’ and ‘knot’ have each three sounds even though the first sound in ‘knot’ is represented by two letters ‘kn’... one’s ability to analyse this correctly depends on one’s sound knowledge of phonetics. In English, there exists an anomalous (irregular) relationship between sound and spelling. This contrasts with most Nigerian languages. This assertion is attested in Roach (1983:1) viz:

Because of the notoriously confusing nature of English spelling, it is particularly important to learn to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than letters of alphabet, one must be aware, for example, that the word ‘enough’ begins with the same vowel phoneme as that at the beginning of ‘inept’ and ends with the same consonant as ‘stuff’.

Relating pronunciation to Nigerian languages, Eyisi (23) argues that in most Nigerian languages, for instance words are pronounced exactly as they are spelt. The English word ‘house’ is, in igbo, written as ‘ulo,’ in Hausa as ‘gida,’ in Yoruba ‘ile’. In each of these cases, the pronunciation follows the same pattern as the spelling. But English spelling, that is, there is a one to one correspondence between the pronunciation or the word and its realization in spelling. In a vast majority of cases is highly deceptive particularly to the foreign learner. This is because its orthography is not always a guide to its pronunciation.

Among the Wapan speakers of English we observed a number of mispronunciations due to spelling pronunciation. A lot of English words are inappropriately pronounced; there is deviation from the norm (RP) as certain peculiar rules, or certain peculiar phonological features of words have not been followed.

	Word	RP Form	Wapan
1.	Doctor	→ /dɒktə/	dɒktəu →
2.	Territory	→ /terɪtri/	terɪtɔri
3.	Elite	→ /ɪli:t/	→ elait
4.	Tomb	→ /tu:m/	→ tɔmb
5.	Plumber	→ /plʌmə/	→ plɔmba

6.	Listen	→	/lɪsn/	→	lɪstɪn
7.	Burn	→	/bɜ:n/	→	bɜ:n
8.	Sachet	→	/sæʃət/	→	sæʃət
9.	Pastor	→	/pa:stə/	→	pa:stəU
10.	Precious	→	/preʃəs/	→	preʃɪs
11.	Favour	→	/feɪvə/	→	fɛɪvə:

In the words above we observe that some RP phonemes are realized differently in Jukun and in some, certain phonemes are introduced. The phonemes are identified below:

Word	RP Phonemes	Wapan
Doctor	/ə/ Schwa or weak vowel	→ /əU/ diphthong
Territory		→ introduction of an epenthetic element /əU/ between the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ and the voiced alveolar trill /r/
Elite	/ɪ/ initially	→ /e/
	/i:/ medially	→ /aɪ/
Tomb	/U:/	→ /əU/ + retention of the letter 'b' finally
Plumber	/ʌ/	→ /ɒ/ medially
	/ə/	→ /a/ finally + retention of the letter 'b' in the second syllable.
Listen		→ Pronunciation of letter 't' and the insertion of a high front lax vowel
Burn	/ɜ:/ central open-mid tense vowel	→ /ɒ/ back open lax vowel
Sachet	/ʃ/ voiceless palato-alveolar fricative	→ /tʃ/ voiceless palato alveolar affricate
	/eɪ/ diphthong	→ /e/ monophthong + retention of the letter 't'
Pastor	/ə/	→ /əU/
Precious	/ə/	→ /ɒ/
Favour	/ə/	→ /ə:/

We discover that Wapan speakers of English tend to make the centering vowel /ə/ more open. The phoneme is realized as /a/ hence Jowitt (1991) commenting on the phonology of Nigerian English observes that we find some of the centering vowels or diphthongs terminating in the centre having more open features than we have in RP.

Also, the Wapan tend not to know how to articulate some English sounds or differentiate between certain pairs of phonemes: voiced and voiceless consonants, long vowels and short vowels. Besides, conflation/replacement of phonemes and insertion of epenthetic sounds are common elements of mispronunciation among them.

We may argue here that some of these pronunciation errors are not peculiar to Wapan speakers of English. Some Nigerian speakers of English do manifest them as well. Hence we often hear the following.

Word	NP (Nigerian Pronunciation)
Sister	Sista
Country	kaʊntri/kɒntri
Another	ænðda
Water	wata
Thursday	tɔ:zdeɪ
Thank	tank
Earth	a:t
Teacher	ti:tʃa
Brother	brɒða
Again	ægeɪn

Word Reduction

Certain phonemes tend to disappear when some learners of English pronounce certain English words. This is far from what is technically referred to as elision: the omission of a sound segment which would be present in the deliberate pronunciation of a word on isolation (Yule, 1991:59). Word reduction is a feature of non-proficiency in the target language as it occurs in instances of both using words in isolation and in casual speech. Both consonants and vowels tend to disappear or be dropped when some learners of English pronounce certain words. Writing on word reduction, Osuagwu... (1997) pointed out that word reduction could be ‘syncope:’ the elision of dropping of sound at the middle of a word, or ‘apocope:’ dropping a sound at the end of a word.

In fact, the observation above characterised the pronunciation of Wapan speakers of English as presented in the words below:

Word	RP	Wapan
Government	/gʌvənmənt/	gɒmen
Biology	/baɪɒlədʒi/	balləʊdʒi
Independent	/ɪndɪpɛndənt/	ɪndɛden
Local	/ləʊkəl/	ləʊka
Jumping	/dʒʌmpɪŋ/	dʒɒmplɪn
Kicking	/kɪkɪŋ/	kɪkɪn
Land	/lənd/	læn
Student	/stju:dnt/	stu:den
Enjoyment	/ɪndʒɔɪmənt/	ɪndʒɔɪmen
Encouragement	/ɪnkʌrɪdʒmənt/	ɪnkɒreɪdʒmən
Entertainment	/entəɪnmənt/	ɪntatenmen
Moment	/məʊmənt/	mɒmen
Band	/bænd/	bæn
Pentecostal	/pentɪkɒstl/	pentakəʊsta
Communicable	/kɒmjʊ:nɪkəbl/	kɒmju:nɪkebu

A part from dropping /t/ finally, the phonemes /v, ə, n/ are medially dropped in government. In biology /ə/ and /D/ are dropped. From our data we observe that the voiceless alveolar

plosive /t/, the voiced alveolar /l/ and the voiced velar nasal /ŋ/ are the most commonly dropped phonemes particularly at word final position or in a closed syllable coda among the people under study. Also, in the word student, which is phonetically transcribed as /stju:dnt/, the voiced palatal glide (semi-vowel or approximant) /j/ is dropped and the vowel /e/ is introduced hence the pronunciation /studen/. The same phoneme is dropped in communicable giving rise to an inappropriate pronunciation: /kɔmunikeybu/. Besides, the voiced alveolar lateral /l/ in communicable is conflated to a close back lax vowel /ʊ/. There are also instances of conflation in encouragement, entertainment and enjoyment as we find below:

Word	Conflated RP Phoneme	Wapan
Encouragement	/ʌ, ɪ, ə/	→ /ɪ, eɪ, e/
Entertainment	/e, ə, eɪ/	→ /ɪ, a, e/
Enjoyment	/ə/	→ /e/

Consonants Clusters

Another area of pronunciation difficulty among Wapan speakers of English is consonant clusters. This is evident in some of the aforementioned examples. A cluster of four consonants in word final is not a feature of Wapan hence we do not have the structure CVCCCC as in English words tempts, exempts, prompts, promptly. In fact, a consonants cluster, particularly at the end of words is often a pronunciation problem to the people under study. Other examples include mankind, which has a cluster of two consonants finally, /n/ and /d/, payment, which also has two consonants finally, /n/ and /t/. But in each of these words we observe the dropping of the final consonant. So we often hear mankind as (mænkain) and payment as (peimen).

The Phonemes (Θ, ð, ξə)

These are some of the English consonants that Wapan speakers of English often find difficult to articulate because they are used to hearing and making sounds which only exist in their own language. Besides, the aforementioned phonemes do not exist in Wapan. It is obvious that they articulate certain English phonemes whether in isolation or connected speech with relative ease because such phonemes exist in their language as we find below:

English Phoneme	Wapan Word	Gloss
i. /əʊ/	ató/vó	Mortar/beg
ii. /aɪ/	ai	we/us
iii. /ɪə/	ɪya	let us go
iv. /ɪ/	bi	come
v. /dʒ/	ajè	a fool
	ajé	fish
vi. /tʃ/	che/nyacho	choose/path
vii. /j/	ya/yé	go/sip
viii. /w/	wa/wè	drink/wear
ix. /p/	apà/apé	human being/pot
x. /b/	bi/bukén	come/shirt
xi. /t/	atò/tà	bow/sow
xii. /k/	akhi	death/masquerade
xiii. /l/	alò	a special porridge for farmers
xiv. /m/	Ama/ami	creator/ I or me

xv.	/n/	anà/anè	cow/big hoe
xvi.	/r/	rikyaa	many
xvii.	/ʒ/	zhe	peel
xviii.	/ʃ/	ashó/ñwutíshé	iron/child
xix.	/h/	ahín/agehe	tree/giant
xx.	/g/	gé/gà	cut/share
xxi.	/s/	aso/asi	beans/yam
xxii.	/z/	aze/azen	hatred/name

CONCLUSION

The study discovered that pronunciation problems among Wapan speakers of English is due to some extent, at least, to mother tongue interference (MT influence) or L1 as most people prefer to call it. Besides, some English phonemes do not exist in Wapan. It is important to know that in spite of the aforementioned problems we cannot generalize because even among the Wapan, ranging from the very highly educated to those with limited education, we find a very great range of usage. Therefore, generalizing is erroneous. It is the suggestion of this paper that Wapan speakers of English need to find out how English speech sounds are articulated by listening to good speakers and articulating them as much as possible; practice makes perfect.

This will enable them to attain a level of oral proficiency that would be easily understood by speakers of English which is spoken across international boundaries. This assertion is evident in the words of Attah (1999:1), since English is an international or world language, acquiring (or aspiring to) an accent that is easily understood and acceptable internationally should be the focus of oral English teaching in Nigerian schools. Wapan speakers of English should endeavour to make English dictionaries their companions.

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